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ABSTRACT

South Area Alternative School is a disciplinary center for conduct disordered adolescents in Broward County, Florida. The center is governed by a school-wide environmental structure so positive that negative behavior is met by appropriate consequences rather than punishment. The intake procedure includes a tour of the facility, discussion of program options, review of past behavior, and expectations of the center. After all questions are answered, the student is asked to make a decision about whether or not he wants to enroll. He is cautioned that the choice is his alone and he must be certain that he is ready to deal with whatever results from his conscious decisions from that point. The next step is often the child's first experience at goal setting. He is asked to write four goals: two academic and two behavioral. The classroom teacher incorporates them into the individualized prescription and the rehabilitative plan commences. In all cases the teacher receives each student with as positive an attitude toward school as possible. Inherent in the philosophy at the center is the belief that classroom teachers who manage students effectively are in a position to teach them more effectively. It is further assumed that successful teachers view management as an integral part of teaching. (LLL)

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POSITIVE ATTITUDES:
THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SELF ESTEEM

A Paper Submitted to ERIC

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POSITIVE ATTITUDES:
THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SELF ESTEEM

Those over the age of forty (40) perhaps recall a popular song exhalting positive attitudes in which the composer identified the most powerful ally of the educator. He advises to "accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative, don't mess with Mr. In-between."

At South Area Alternative School, a disciplinary center for conduct disordered adolescents in Broward County, Florida, this advice is practiced regularly by staff, students and their parents.

As part of the in-take procedure at the center, which boasts open-ended enrollment, a student and his parents are required to have a conference at the school to discuss the request for admission. Invariably during the discourse, the student offers the explanation that the problems at his home school were the fault of his teachers who did not like him. In his mind, their attitudes toward him placed him in a defensive posture and justified any behavior. The self fullfilling prophesy becomes the easy way to support behavior he consciously recognizes as inappropriate.

In most cases the parents do not condone the acts but share the pain of what they perceive as a rejective attitude on the part of the home school. Since they lack the skills to deal with it they become convinced that they too must be unworthy.

The rehabilitative challenge this presents is met at the center by a school-wide environmental structure so positive that negative behavior is met by appropriate consequences rather than punishment.

"There are consequences for all behavior" is the theme which prevails over every aspect of the program. As a result, students are encouraged to assume command of their progress, academic and behavioral, to achieve the consequences of their choice. Rewards are soon the goal and negative behaviors becomes a thing of the past. Consistency among staff is vital to this effort as a "weak link" is soon discovered and exploited by the manipulative nature of the conduct disordered child.

The in-take procedure, which is the center's version of an ESE staffing, includes a tour of the facility, discussion of program options, review of past behavior and expectations of the center. After all questions are answered, the student is asked to make a decision as to whether or not he wants to enroll. He is cautioned that the choice is his alone and he must be certain that he is ready to deal with whatever results from his conscious decisions from that point on.

Thus the master manipulator receives his first taste of being out-manipulated. His defense of blaming others has been skillfully removed; his parent is "off the hook" and both see the center as representing hope for a brighter future.

Fewer than one half of one percent of the students interviewed over a nine (9) year period have declined enrollment at South Area Alternative School. This figure is less than remarkable in light of the probability that the thinking process of the conduct disorder forces him to accept what he identifies as immediate gratification. Enrollment at the center represents a way for him to reject the home school which he feels rejected him. The sweet taste of power usually prevails.

The next step in the in-take process is often the child's first experience at goal setting. He is asked to write four goals-two (2) academic and two (2) behavioral. The classroom teacher incorporates them into the individualized prescription and the rehabilitative plan commences.

In all cases the teacher receives each student with as positive an attitude toward school as possible. He is there by choice, he sees a path to follow to achieve his goals and his delusions regarding who is in control have been clarified. However, he will test the system in time and the skilled teacher is ready for it

Examination of the following scenarios will illustrate the impact of teacher reaction to the process of restructuring attitudes and the gradual elevation of self-esteem.

Scenario I

Bobby breaks his pencil while taking notes in Mrs. Gray's English class. The teacher observes this and continues the lesson as she takes a pencil from her desk and hands it to him. The lesson continues uninterrupted.

.Bobby's perception: "I wasn't bad because I broke my pencil. Mrs. Gray noticed and loaned me hers-she must like me."

Mrs. Grays perception: "I used a nonverbal intervention to anticipate a potential incident. My immediate response helped me continue the lesson and maintain control. I am an effective teacher."

Classmate's perception: "Mrs. Gray didn't get mad when Bobby broke his pencil. She tries to help us learn. I feel safe in her class."

Principal's perception: "Mrs. Gray didn't call me to deal with any student's today. She is a good teacher. I am a good judge of teaching ability since I hired her."

Parent's perception: "Mrs. Gray didn't call to complain about Bobby today. He came home from school happy. It must be a good school."

Everybody wins!

Scenario II

Bobby breaks his pencil while taking notes in Mrs. Gray's English class. The teacher is so engrossed in the lesson that she does not notice. It is Bobby's first day and he only has one pencil. He attempts to borrow one from a classmate who resists. Words are exchanged, desks are toppled and the Principal takes both students to the office.

Bobby's perception: "This is like my other school. Mrs. Gray is like my other teachers. Teachers don't like me-the other kids don't like me I hate it here."

Mrs. Gray's perception: "That new kid is a troublemaker. I'm a teacher not a policeman. How can I be expected to teach if the

Principal can't make kids behave and the parents don't care?. I worked hard on this lesson-noone appreciates my efforts!"

Principals' perception: "Why did I ever leave the classroom? At least there I had somewhere to pass the buck."

Classmate's perception: "That new kid Bobby tried to steal my pencil and the teacher didn't care. Now I'm in trouble for nothing. I hate this school."

Parent's perception: "School's aren't what they used to be. Why can't they handle these problems? What do they expect me to do-I'm not there. "

Everybody loses!

The failure of an adolescent to make appropriate behavioral choices is often erroneously construed to be the result soley of "his" negative attitude. Nothing is further from the truth. Attitudes are not developed in isolation but rather, as illustrated in the scenarios, are contributed to by all players. The ripple effect exists in attitude development, whether negative or positive, but the issue most overlooked is the necessity of concerted effort in the reconstruction of positive views. Everyone, no matter how seemingly powerless, has an opinion which translates to an attitude.

It has been said that "One can not share what one lacks." A teacher with self esteem and a positive attitude will impart that to his students. Unfortunately, the converse is also true and the teacher who thinks Bobby is a troublemaker has doomed them both to failure.

Inherent in the philosophy at the center is the belief that classroom teachers who manage students effectively are in a position to teach them more effectively. It is further assumed that successful teachers view management as an integral part of teaching.

Accordingly in Scenario I the message delivered by the teacher is "The classroom is my domain and I expect compliance with my rules. Failure to do your best is not an option in my class.

Your success is important to me as I value you.. We will work together to help you achieve your goals."

There is no person in a child's life better able to help break the negative cycle of failure than the teacher, who in most instances spends more waking hours with him than his parent. In the case of a conduct disordered child, who has met with overwhelming defeat in his young life, successful experiences are essential if he is to develop the positive attitude necessary to alter behavior. In Scenario II the message delivered by the teacher, in her abdication of the responsibility of management, is "I reject you-get out of my class. I choose not to deal with you as you are not worth my time or effort."

In this case the teacher has not only failed to seize an opportunity to share a positive experience with the child but has reinforced the child's belief that he is unworthy. In addition she has reduced her own potential for effectiveness.

To all students, rejection is painful but to the special needs child it is cruel and can be devastating as well. The fine line between accepting the child at all costs but rejecting his inappropriate behavior is what will begin the journey toward self confidence. The skillful teacher can be the vehicle or another obstacle. It is a matter of choice.